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Opinion: everyday activities can teach self-regulation

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Abstract

The evidence is in: improving young children's self-regulation can help them onto more positive life trajectories. But how can we generate these improvements? In contrast to a growing trend called brain training, it seems there are everyday things that can yield similar benefits.

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The evidence is in: improving young children's self-regulation can help them onto more positive life trajectories. But how can we generate these improvements? In contrast to a growing trend called brain training, it seems there are everyday things that can yield similar benefits.

Early self-regulation – that is, children's ability to control their thinking, behaviour, social interactions and emotional reactions, despite distractions and contrary urges – has been shown to predict academic success in childhood, and health and wealth in adults. Children with low self-regulation in the preschool years are at greater risk for poorer academic outcomes when they enter school, and poor physical health, substance abuse, financial difficulties and anti-social behaviours in adulthood.

Yet these outcomes are not fixed. Research has shown that children who eventually become more self-controlled, for whatever reason, tend to have better outcomes as adults. Efforts to improve self-regulation in early childhood, in particular, have been suggested to produce more pronounced, stable and lasting change, and can yield greater return on financial investment. Even more, long-term benefits of early self-regulation intervention can be expected not only for children with low self-regulation in preschool, but also amongst those who have average or above average self-regulatory abilities.

Growing interest in improving children's self-regulation, including the cognitive abilities that underpin successful self-regulation (often called executive functions) is, therefore, unsurprising. Recently, this focus has yielded a growing trend towards computerised brain training as a means to promote self-regulatory abilities – a now more than $1 billion industry. It seems that new programs to train your brain appear almost weekly, most without any clear evidence of their effectiveness. When such programs do have research support, they tend to show only modest gains in the specific abilities being trained and

limited transfer of benefits to real-world outcomes.

One possible explanation for these less-than-compelling outcomes is that brain training programs typically do not address all the conditions necessary for successful self-regulated behaviour, or minimise the importance of things we know short-circuit self-control. For instance, a decision to act in a self-directed manner (to say, 'I want to help clean up'), motivation to persist in the face of challenge or enticing alternatives ('I want to clean up, even while everyone else is playing'), and knowledge and strategies to support self-regulated behaviour (I have to clean up because it's my turn) can all help children become more self-regulated.

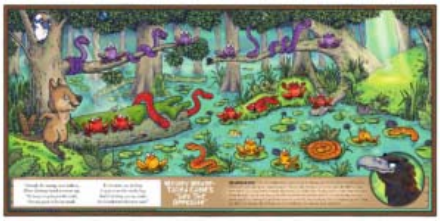
These behaviours can be difficult for children because they are often confronted with circumstances that short-circuit self-regulation, like stress, loneliness, lack of sleep, poor health and lack of social connections, especially because young children have comparatively little capacity to overcome distractions and impulses.

An emerging trend has sought to address this by targeting both the cognitive and non-cognitive factors that promote self-regulation. This approach has used existing and routine practices that engage and extend young children's ability to self-regulate, rather than expensive and time-consuming programs such as computerised brain training.

As one example, researchers have begun looking at the potential self-regulatory benefits of sports participation. It is easy to envision how sports might tax and extend children's cognitive control abilities. Even within modified sports for young children, the need to remember the sport's aims and rules, inhibit impulses to simply chase the ball or not wait one's turn, remember action sequences, hold positions, maintain form, and flexibly switch between the ever-changing considerations of the sport (for example, offence versus defence) can continually challenge young children's cognitive control.

Further, by supporting enjoyment levels, physical health, and social connectedness, sports might also mitigate other factors that undermine improvements in self-regulation. While the evidence for this is still relatively new, it suggests promise for sports that challenge children's cognitive control.

Another recent approach has sought to embed cognitive challenge in another activity that is already commonplace: book-reading. Specifically, the children's book *Quincey Quokka's Quest* was developed as a means to embed cognitive and self-regulatory challenge in the context of reading. Like most other children's books, it begins with a rhyming story and associated illustrations. However, embedded in each double-page spread is a cognitively challenging activity as an obstacle the child must help the main character overcome. In one activity, for example, children are asked to remember a particular path across the stream, and then reverse it when they encounter a crocodile on the other side. The approach of sharing the reading also attempts to foster enjoyment and social connectedness. While still in the early stages of investigation, three initial studies into this book suggest improved outcomes in as little as three weeks, with benefits persisting two months after reading ceases.



Taken together, the mounting research suggests the possibility of achieving self-regulatory benefits from low- to no-cost everyday activities, thus expanding the range of settings, contexts and activities available for fostering self-regulatory abilities.

Dr Steven Howard is a lecturer in the school of education at the University of Wollongong.

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